

# Harry T. Burn and the Perfect 36

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## Harry T. Burn and the Perfect 36

*Essential Questions: What role did Harry T. Burn play in the women's suffrage movement? What role did Tennessee play in the women's suffrage movement?*

On a hot and muggy summer morning in the month of August 1920, a young 24 year-old Republican lawmaker from Niota (McMinn County), in the southern valley of East Tennessee, changed his “Nay” vote to an “Aye” during a critical final ballot to decide the fate on ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment to the United States Constitution. Burn’s momentous decision to vote in favor of women’s suffrage not only secured the elusive victory that suffragists had sought since the Seneca Falls Convention of 1848. It also secured a place for both Burn and his widowed mother, Febb Ensminger Burn, in American history as they delivered Tennessee as the “Perfect 36” state to ratify the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment.

On Friday, August 18, the Tennessee House deliberated a joint resolution for ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment that had recently passed in the state Senate. Thirty-five states had already ratified the amendment. If Tennessee became the thirty-sixth state to ratify, the amendment would become law. It was in a tense atmosphere that several legislators rose from their desks to deliver impassioned speeches that merely recounted the age-old arguments waged by “suffs” (suffragists) and “antis” (anti-suffragists) for and against women’s suffrage. After a lengthy debate, House Speaker Seth Walker, a proclaimed “anti,” boldly proclaimed, “The hour has come. The battle has been fought and won, and I move . . . that the motion to concur in the Senate action goes where it belongs—to the table.”

A deaf silence blanketed the chamber as the motion was put forth on the House floor to table the amendment—tantamount to its death as the bill would be held over until the next legislative session convened after the fall elections. In the midst of the excitement, no one could discern the inner turmoil that waged within Harry Burn’s mind. Sitting in his chair in the third row to the right of the rostrum, Burn wore a red rose (the symbol of the antis) on his jacket lapel. His constituents back home in McMinn County were bitterly divided—an ever-increasing majority of public opinion in the county was turning against women’s suffrage. He also faced reelection in the upcoming fall election and a deciding vote either way might cost him the votes needed to secure his seat in the next session of the General Assembly. Therefore, Burn was content to vote in favor of tabling the amendment. When the House clerk reached his name, the seventh on the list of 96 in attendance, Burn voted with the antis to table the amendment. “I had voted to table the amendment,” he later explained, “not in opposition but in hopes that it would come up again at the next session.” The vote was 48 to 48. Speaker Wallace demanded a recount. Again, the vote was deadlocked at 48 to 48. Therefore, the amendment remained alive on the House floor.

Speaker Wallace then moved to reconsider the original motion—a vote on the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment. Now Burn was faced with a decision he had hoped he would not have to confront as the deciding vote on whether or not the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment became the law of the land. Unbeknownst to his fellow colleagues, Burn carried a letter from his mother in his breast pocket that admonished him to vote in favor of the amendment.

Burn's mother, a strong-willed widow of a farmer covered the woman suffrage debate from their Niota home when not milking cows, churning butter, cleaning and mending for her family, by reading four newspapers and a dozen magazines that she subscribed to. Febb Burn would later tell a reporter, "Suffrage has interested me for years. I like the suffrage militants as well as the others." But after having read a barrage of bitter "anti" speeches published in the papers and realizing that her son's constituents in McMinn County were fiercely in opposition to women's suffrage, Mrs. Burn maintained that she felt compelled to force the issue. "I sat down on [my] little chair on the front porch and penned a few lines to my son."

In fact, Febb Burn wrote more than a few lines in regards to supporting ratification, which were interspersed among other family matters, in a seven-page letter to Harry.

*"Dear Son, ... Hurray and vote for Suffrage and don't keep them in doubt. I noticed Chandlers' speech, it was very bitter. I've been waiting to see how you stood but have not seen anything yet.... Don't forget to be a good boy and help Mrs. Catt with her "Rats." Is she the one that put rat in ratification, Ha! No more from mama this time. With lots of love, Mama."*

Burn had read and re-read the words from his mother that he had just received and he hoped that he would not have to take a definitive stand on the measure until after the election. In fact, Burn had earlier told a prominent suffragist lobbyist that his vote would never hurt their cause, which led many to believe he was in fact a supporter of women's suffrage, but a legislator conflicted by the will of his constituents. Despite his pledge to the suffragist, Burn did not believe he would ever have to take a decisive stand on the issue at this point in time. Nevertheless, when the "antis" made a move to kill the bill by calling for a vote on the amendment itself, Burn faced a moral dilemma—to vote against the amendment and remain faithful to his "anti" constituents in light of his upcoming re-election campaign or remain faithful to the wishes of his mother.

The House clerk proceeded to call the roll for the third time, this time, a vote to decide the fate of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment in Tennessee. When the clerk called his name, Burn voted "Aye." His vote came so quickly, so unexpectedly, that many in the galleries and on the House floor were caught off guard. Several thought that the young Republican freshman had innocently become confused by the prior two votes and meant to vote "Nay" instead of "Aye." Indeed, Burn had made no mistake. He had cast his ballot for women's suffrage, and thus, cast the key ballot in the 49-47 vote that made the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment the supreme law of the land.

"Antis" in the galleries and on the House floor began shouting absurdities at Burn. Josephine Pearson, the most vocal Tennessee anti-suffragist labeled Burn a "traitor to manhood's honor." "Anti" supporting newspapers reported that Joe Hanover, a Jewish immigrant legislator targeted by the anti-suffragists for his ardent defense of women's suffrage, had paid Burn \$10,000 to change his vote. He was also accused of accepting a bribe from Governor Robert's personal secretary. The charges of bribery did not stick to the East Tennessean. Unfazed by the intimidation tactics, Burn responded to the anti-attacks on his integrity and honor by inserting a

personal statement in the *House Journal*, explaining his decision to cast his vote for the suffragists based on morality, justice, his mother, and the glory of the Republican party:

*“I desire to resent in the name of honesty and justice the veiled intimidation and accusation regarding my vote on the Suffrage Amendment as indicated in certain statements, and it is my sincere belief that those responsible for their existence know that there is not a scintilla of truth in them. I want to state that I changed my vote in favor of ratification first because I believe in full suffrage as a right; second, I believe we had a moral and legal right to ratify; third, I knew that a mother’s advice is always safest for a boy to follow and my mother wanted me to vote for ratification; fourth, I appreciated the fact that an opportunity such as seldom comes to a mortal man to free seventeen million women from political slavery was mine; fifth, I desired that my party in both State and nation might say that it was a republican from the East mountains of Tennessee, the purest Anglo- Saxon section in the world, who made national woman suffrage possible at this date, not for personal glory but for the glory of his party.”*

With the state of suffrage nerves already running at a fever pitch, they reached a further boiling point when Harry Burn was reported as having left the capital. The clerks at the hotel that Burn was registered at said he had left but they had no idea of his current whereabouts. The pro-suffrage forces throughout Tennessee feared that he may have deserted, or worse, been kidnapped. Not long thereafter Burn’s name appeared on the register book of another Nashville hotel where he had relocated to escape anti-attacks and public scrutiny.

The anti-attacks on Burn did not cease following the momentous vote. His enemies poured into McMinn County during Burn’s fall re-election campaign. “People from all over the country went into my county,” he recalled. “They held indignation meetings, passed resolutions. . . . When I went home for a weekend I would generally keep a bodyguard around so that no one would attack me.” His political enemies even accosted his mother at their farm when he was away from home. They urged her to disavow her “infamous” letter, but she remained steadfast. In the end, Burn managed to survive and win re-election to a second term; however, Tennessee’s Democratic Governor Albert H. Roberts, a Johnny-come-lately supporter to the suffragist camp, did not fare so well, suffering defeat to Republican Alfred A. Taylor.

Years later, Burn proudly reflected on his deciding vote: *“I had always believed that women had an inherent right to vote. It was a logical attitude from my standpoint. My mother was a college woman, a student of national and international affairs who took an interest in all public issues. She could not vote. Yet the tenant farmers on our farm, some of whom were illiterate, could vote. On that roll call, confronted with the fact that I was going to go on record for time and eternity on the merits of the question, I had to vote for ratification.*

**Sources:** Wheeler, Marjorie Spruill, ed. *Votes for Women: The Woman Suffrage Movement in Tennessee, the South, and the Nation* (Knoxville, 1995)  
Yellin, Carol Lynn and Janann Sherman, *The Perfect 36: Tennessee Delivers Woman Suffrage* ed. By Ilene Jones- Cornwell (Oak Ridge, Tennessee, 1998)



# Perfect 36

Write a short newspaper article from the perspective of a person who just found out about the Perfect 36 and the ratification of the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment. Things to keep in mind: What does this vote mean to you? Why is this important?

(Your response should be about 3 sentences.)

Answers will vary, but should reflect idea that both men and women supported and opposed women's suffrage.

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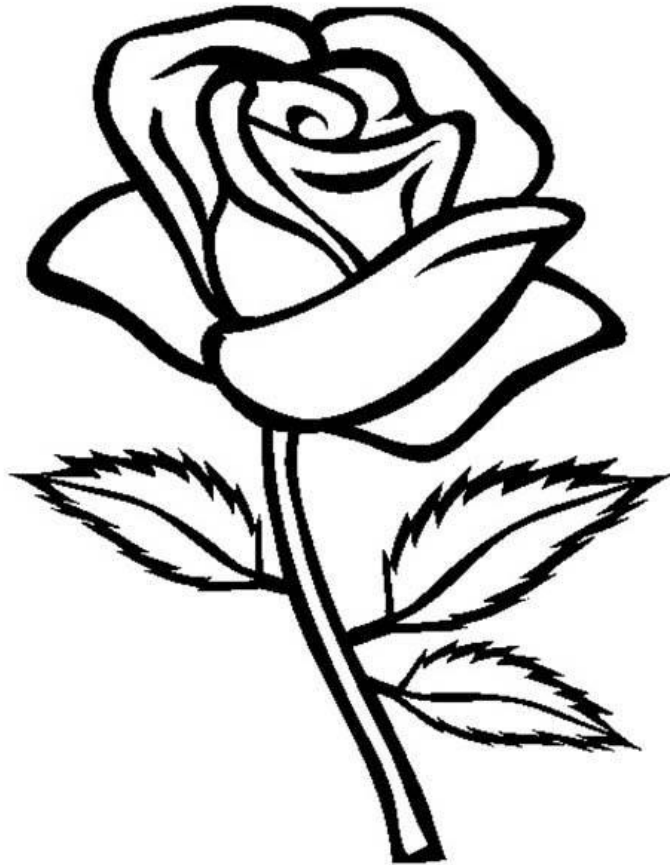
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# Harry T. Burn

Use the text as a reference to color in the picture and answer the question below.



Does every vote matter?

What would've happened if Harry T. Burn hadn't changed his?

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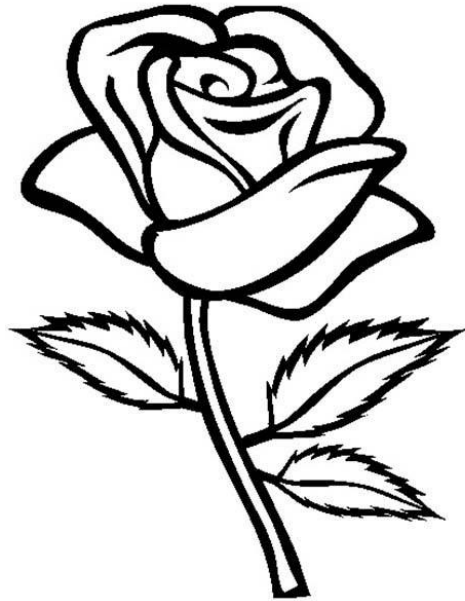






# Harry T. Burn

Use the text as a reference to color in the picture and answer the question below.



As you get closer to voting you'll hear more and more people say things like, "My vote doesn't matter anyways." Does every vote matter? What would've happened if Harry T. Burn hadn't changed his?

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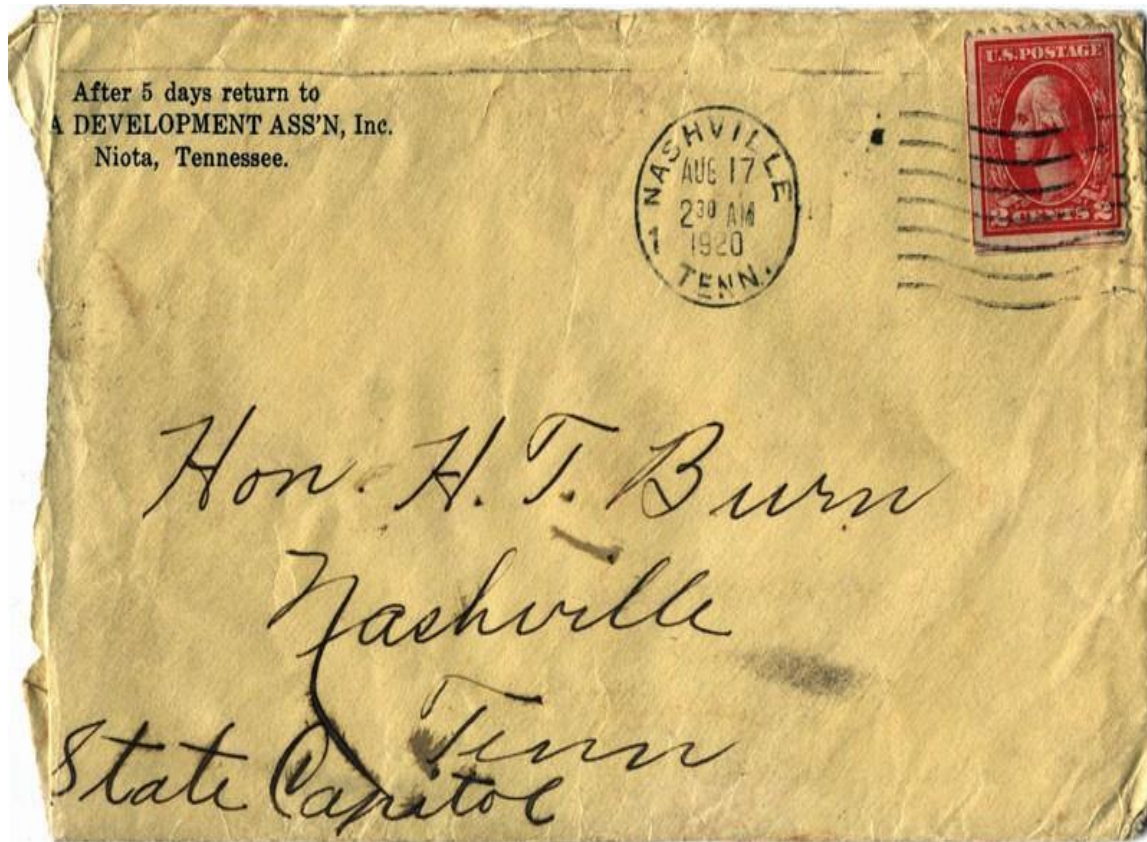
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# Harry T. Burn and the Perfect 36 Primary Sources

## The Harry T. Burn Letter



Dear Son,

I wish you were home too. We have had nothing but rain since you left. meeting still in progress, Otho and I haven't been a single time

Uncle Bill and Mrs. Bushnell came over this P. M., stayed about an hour they were in the Ford. We haven't had the car out since you left, and if this rainy weather does not lift up, I fear we will

Febb E. Burn to Harry T. Burn, August 17, 1920, p. 7 Harry T. Burn Papers, C. M. McClung Historical Collection



have to stay at home the  
rest of the summer.  
The Rockwood crowd is  
going to White Cliff Labor  
Day. Will you be home  
by then. Hurrah and  
vote for suffrage and  
don't keep them in  
doubt. I noticed Chandlers  
speech it was very  
bittles I've been watching  
to see how you stood  
but have not seen  
any thing yet.

Mr. Orwick  
(the mill man) bought  
the Charlie Water badger  
house Uncle Ben the  
farm. I do not know  
the prices they paid  
you know. "Jack" does  
not like to be interrogated.



you will tire of what  
I am writing, but I  
haven't anything else  
to write about.

Jack went to Athens  
on Monday after  
you left, & said your  
majority was 840  
pretty good for a  
fellow that had  
made a "dog and  
Road" law.

But I do hope you are  
still in the notion of  
not making the race  
this fall, I hope you see  
enough of politicians to  
know it is not one of  
the greatest things to  
be one, what say  
ye? &?

Febb E. Burn to Harry T. Burn, August 17, 1920, p. 7 Harry T. Burn  
Papers, C. M. McClung Historical Collection



Do not know whether it  
was a successful sale  
or not, I only know it  
was rainy. Mr Waterbarger's  
little boy got his arm  
broken that day.

Everything is  
getting in readiness for  
the wedding. Mintie  
was real sick yesterday  
but was better this morning.  
I am uneasy about her &  
she has been complaining  
all summer. Talked to  
Sadie yesterday. She expressed  
her regrets about you  
not going to be here.  
We are invited down to  
the home after the  
wedding. They are sending  
cards only to friends &  
away.

Febb E. Burn to Harry T. Burn, August 17, 1920, p. 7 Harry T. Burn  
Papers, C. M. McClung Historical Collection



Give my regards to  
Mrs Griffith, and tell  
him I have no fears  
about you now, for I  
think you are in  
safe hands. Am glad  
you like the change  
I should think it  
would be quicker, and  
you could study better.  
Or are you doing any  
serious thinking? I  
thought every day last  
week I'd write you  
but just kept putting  
it off. We are all as  
usual. This is beginning

Febb E. Burn to Harry T. Burn, August 17, 1920, p. 7 Harry T. Burn  
Papers, C. M. McClung Historical Collection



to fix for school. She  
wants you here to  
go with her.

I write mother every  
time you have a  
chance, for I am always  
looking for a letter  
when you are away.

Don't forget to be a  
good boy, and help  
Mrs "Thomas Catt"  
with her "Rats"

Is she the one that  
put rat in ratification  
& a' no more from  
Mama this time  
with lots of love Mama.  
over

Febb E. Burn to Harry T. Burn, August 17, 1920, p. 7 Harry T. Burn  
Papers, C. M. McClung Historical Collection

Febb E. Burn to Harry T. Burn, August 17, 1920, p. 7 Harry T. Burn  
Papers, C. M. McClung Historical Collection

as  
opportunity, get me  
the music, name  
"Humoresque"  
EB

Febb E. Burn to Harry T. Burn, August 17, 1920, p. 7 Harry T. Burn  
Papers, C. M. McClung Historical Collection